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Evaluating the Performance of Public Services: Introducing The Evaluator's Comparison Framework

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Evaluating the Performance of Public Services: Introducing The Evaluator's Comparison Framework

Summary

As public services come under more scrutiny, practitioners are evaluating more of their investments in human capital. But, faced with numerous evaluation approaches, how do they compare them? This paper presents The Evaluator's Comparison Framework (ECF), a useful tool for comparing the planning, implementation (including monitoring and evaluation), and reporting elements of a project/initiative. It also demonstrates the framework in use with a comparison of the Logical Framework Approach (LFA) and the abdi Recommended ROI approach. From this demonstration, the differences between these approaches can be seen, allowing evaluators to select the one more appropriate to their needs.

Track: Public Management and Governance

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Introduction

Times are changing. With it are the increasing demands for public services to be managed better. As such, proven practices and models from business and other sectors are being adopted in public service management to improve its efficiency and effectiveness. Included in this are the myriad of evaluation approaches used in education and international development, among other fields. (Görgens and Kusek 2009, Herzberg 2008, Mackay 2004, Stufflebeam 2001) This presents its own challenge, how do practitioners choose the right approach for their organisation and/or initiative? Although there have been suggestions for selecting appropriate approaches (see for examples, Chelimsky 2007 and Hansen 2005), no framework was found that compared approaches based on their planning, implementation (including monitoring and evaluation) and reporting stages. This paper provides an introduction to The Evaluator's Comparison Framework (ECF)¹, which does this. It begins with an introduction to the ECF, followed by two examples of it in use – the long established Logical Framework Approach and the relatively new abdi Recommended ROI approach. It will conclude with some remarks on the development plan for the ECF.

The Evaluator's Comparison Framework

The ECF was developed to help evaluators compare approaches used to evaluate human capital initiatives/projects. Warren Baum originally developed the project cycle in the 1970s. Since then it has been adopted in different forms within a variety of contexts. (Howes 1992, Landoni and Corti 2011) Baum's project cycle has six stages – identification, preparation, appraisal, negotiation, implementation and supervision, and evaluation. (Landoni and Corti 2011) The first three stages usually occur before the project starts, the fourth and the fifth occur during the project. (Howes 1992) However, depending on the evaluation approach being used, as well as the type of evaluation, the sixth stage can occur throughout the life of the project or at its completion. The ECF incorporates these by examining human capital initiatives at three basic stages – BEFORE, DURING and AFTER the initiative (see Figure 1).

¹ The ECF is being developed as one of the outputs of a doctoral study underway at the Open University Business School. The doctoral study is examining how the idea and concept of the financial metric, return on investment (ROI), is applied in measuring the performance of human capital initiatives in the contexts of corporate, health service and international development. It is part sponsored by abdi Ltd, a professional service firm that provides consultancy services in planning, measuring and reporting benefits, including impact outcomes and value for money (ROI) of human capital initiatives. They also provide UK accredited training courses in their recommended evaluation approach, where learners receive one of their abdi ROI awards or certificates.

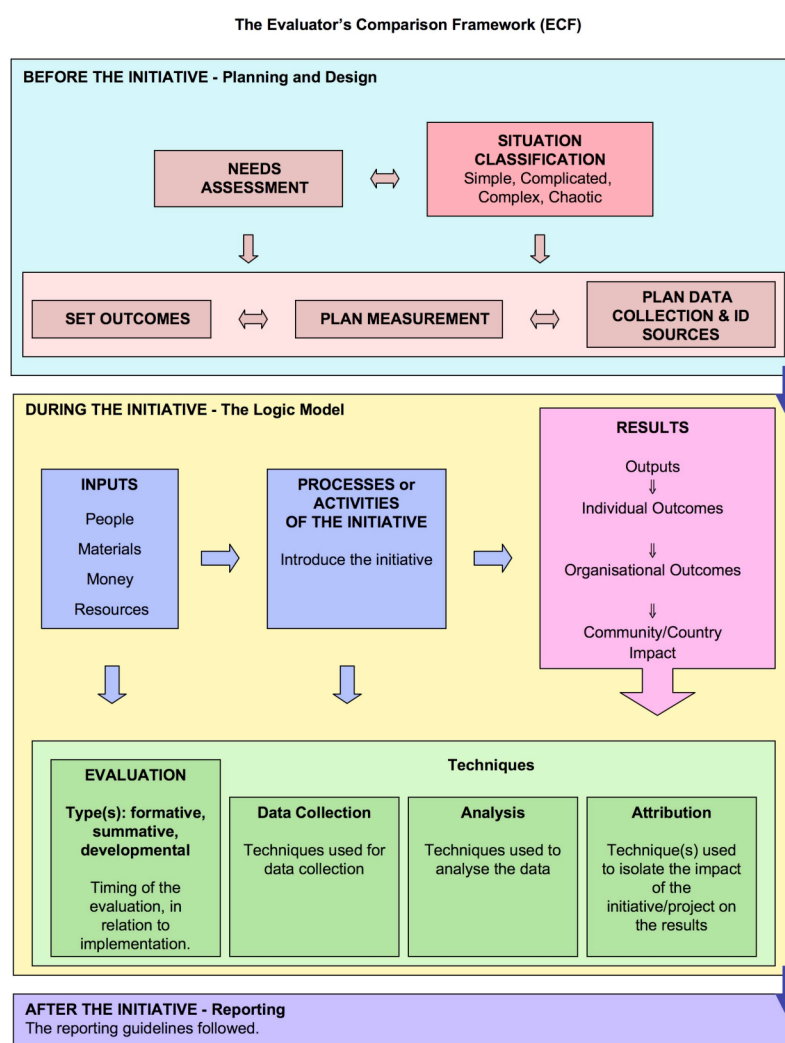


Figure 1: The Evaluator's Comparison Framework

The first section, 'BEFORE', covers the planning and design of the initiative and the evaluation. The main elements are 'needs assessment', 'set outcomes', 'plan measurement' and 'plan data collection & ID sources'. Since organisations operate in a variety of circumstances that can influence the design of the evaluation and the approach selected, the element 'situation classification' has also been included to cover four types of situations: simple, complicated, complex and chaotic. (Patton 2011) These situations are summarised in Table 1. (Patton 2011, Rogers 2009).

Table 1: Classification of Situations

Aspects	Intervention Type	Evaluation Purpose
<p><i>Simple</i></p> <p>High agreement and certainty about what needs to be done and that the desired results will be achieved.</p> <p>Eg Campaign to increase the number of flu vaccinations for pregnant women.</p>	Standardised intervention	To learn if the intervention works, in what contexts it works and to inform ongoing policy.

Aspects	Intervention Type	Evaluation Purpose
<p><i>Complicated</i></p> <p>There is some disagreement about the problem – what needs to be done; what the desired results should be; and whether the outcomes are achievable.</p> <p>Eg Implementation of a leadership program for middle managers to reduce absenteeism.</p>	<p>More than one effective way of intervening is possible.</p>	<p>To assess the overall impact of a completed project/program.</p>
<p><i>Complex</i></p> <p>High uncertainty about how to produce desired results and great disagreement about the nature of the problem among stakeholders.</p> <p>Eg Donor support to an Anti-corruption Commission in an African country.</p>	<p>Adaptive and emergent intervention, responsive to needs, problems and opportunities.</p>	<p>To understand and improve an ongoing and changing program.</p>
<p><i>Chaotic</i></p> <p>High conflict among stakeholders and extreme uncertainty about what to do. Turbulence and volatility make pattern detection unreliable; tense, stressful decision environment.</p> <p>Eg Humanitarian effort in war-torn areas in the Middle East.</p>	<p>Dynamic interactions are hard to follow, not sure what to pay attention to ... what to focus on is unknown and a matter of great debate.</p>	<p>To distinguish better from worse data, interpret cautiously and evaluate where immediate contribution can be made to help survive chaos.</p>

The second section, ‘DURING’, covers the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the initiative. At the core of most evaluations is the concept of the logic model. The logic model asserts that the logical sequence for implementing an initiative is: *input* \Rightarrow *process/activity* \Rightarrow *output* \Rightarrow *outcomes* \Rightarrow *impact*. (Herzberg 2008) This is sometimes called the ‘results chain’. (DFID 2009) In the ECF, this section is used to identify the inputs of the initiative, the processes or activities the initiative utilises, and the results anticipated as outputs and different levels or types of outcomes. It also highlights the evaluation types that the approach is suitable for, as well as the techniques used for data collection, analysis and attributing the results to the initiative.

The final section is for ‘AFTER’ the initiative, and is concerned with how the report is prepared, in particular the conventions or rules adopted by the particular approach.

The Logical Framework Approach

Leon J Rosenberg and Lawrence D Posner, of Practical Concepts Incorporated (PCI), developed the Logical Framework Approach (LFA) in 1969, in response to a request to analyse the project evaluation system of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). (PCI 1979) Since then, the LFA has been used in various sectors and contexts, especially in development, in its original version and, more

recently, in amended versions. (BOND 2003, Couillard et al. 2009, DFID 2009, Gasper 2000, PCI 1979) The original version of the LFA is used for this paper.

The LFA is based on the logic of three interlocking hypotheses (PCI 1979):

- IF the *inputs* (activities and resources) are managed properly and assumptions (about factors outside the control of the project) holds true, THEN the *outputs* will be produced.
- IF the *outputs* are produced and the assumptions (about factors outside of the control of the project) holds true, THEN the *purpose* will be achieved.
- IF the *purpose* is achieved and assumptions (about factors concerning the long-term value of the program) hold true, THEN this will contribute to the success of the higher-level *goal(s)*.

At the core of these hypotheses is the understanding that since these are human capital efforts there is uncertainty and this will affect the project's probability of success. (Ibid.) These uncertainties are to be identified and assumptions about the likelihood of them affecting the project clearly outlined. In addition, at the project design stage it is important to identify relevant indicators, as well as means of verifying these indicators, to demonstrate success. These results are a crucial part of the project evaluation.

At the end of the LFA process, a 4 x 4 matrix is prepared; known as the 'logframe' or 'project matrix'. It provides a summary of the main project information and activities, and their relationship with each other. The aim is to present the elements of the project in a clear, concise, systematic way. (BOND 2003) On the left hand side of the matrix are the four levels of objectives, which shows their vertical relationship and looks at the 'why' (i.e. the reason for embarking on this logical sequence):

- Inputs – resources are transformed into activities to produce outputs
- Outputs – immediate results that are a direct consequence of the project's activities
- Purpose – the outcomes of the combined outputs and the aim of the project
- Goal – the higher level aim that the project contributes to

Here, the hypothesis is that once an initiative or programme has been identified the goal(s) of that programme is achieved if the purpose(s)/aim(s) of its sub-projects are fulfilled by their specific outputs, which resulted from inputs into successful activities.

The right hand side of the matrix has three columns that demonstrate the horizontal relationship of each objective and their elements of success (looking at 'how' success will be assessed):

- Objectively Verifiable Indicators – demonstration of results by defining conditions that denote the achievement of objectives. This is called End of Project Status (EOPS) at the purpose level.
- Means of Verification – identifying the sources of data for the indicators

- Assumptions – factors necessary for success but that are outside of the control of the project team. (PCI 1979)

As can be seen in the ECF (Figure 2), the causal relationship between the levels of results is assumed. The activities of the project are selected because they are believed to provide the highest probability of achieving the outputs. In the same way, the outputs are selected because they are believed to be the most likely reason for the project's purpose to be achieved and therefore contribute to the overall programme goal. Although other factors outside of the initiative or project are captured (under assumptions), the causal relationship is not tested.

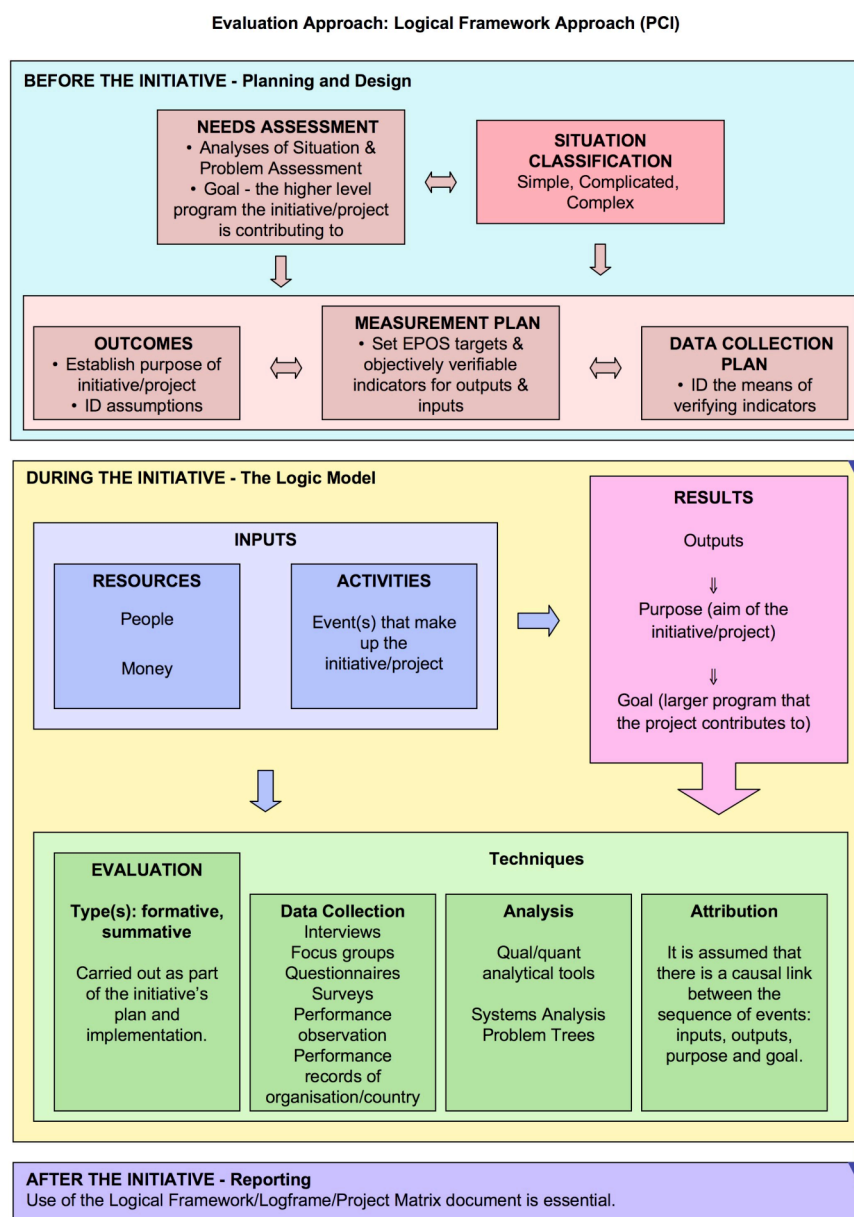


Figure 2: The Logical Framework Approach (LFA)

The abdi Recommended ROI Approach

Relatively new, the abdi Recommended ROI approach is being applied in the corporate, health service and international development contexts. It draws on a number of established theories and evaluation models, such as Kirkpatrick's Learning Evaluation Model, Phillips' ROI Methodology, Theories of Change, Benefits Realisation and Logic Models. (abdi Ltd 2012) At the core of this approach are Kirkpatrick's Learning Evaluation Model and Phillips' ROI Methodology.

Developed in the 1950s, the key features of Kirkpatrick's model are the four levels of evaluation (Kirkpatrick 1996, Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick 2007):

- Level 1 – Reaction
- Level 2 – Learning
- Level 3 – Behaviour
- Level 4 – Results

It was developed for use in evaluating learning and development initiatives and has since been adapted and refined by others. (Tamkin et al. 2002) The Phillips' ROI Methodology is one such adaptation. It added a fifth level, ROI, incorporated isolation techniques (control groups, trend line analysis, forecasting and estimations) and provided 12 guidelines for evaluation. (Phillips 2003) The five levels are:

- Level 1 – Reaction, Satisfaction & Planned Actions
- Level 2 – Learning
- Level 3 – Application & Implementation
- Level 4 – Business Impact
- Level 5 – ROI (Return on Investment).

The abdi Recommended ROI approach extends these approaches further by refining the levels (defined as their "taxonomy of outcomes") and adding a sixth, implementing project tools to facilitate a more disciplined planning stage, and focussing on stakeholder engagement and accountability. (abdi Ltd 2012) Their six levels of outcomes are:

- Level 1 – Engagement
- Level 2 – Learning & Confidence
- Level 3 – Application & Implementation
- Level 4 – Impact Outcomes
- Level 5 – ROI
- Level 6 – Non-monetised impact outcomes

Since "there is no way to show a direct causal link between a project or programme and the achievement of impact outcome objectives" (abdi Ltd 2012), emphasis is placed on systematically gathering data from engagement to application and impact outcomes to create the 'chain of impact', isolating for other factors that could influence the impact outcomes. The 'chain of impact' shows the link between each level of outcome to provide credible evidence of the impact of the initiative. (Ibid.)

The abdi approach integrates both the planning of the evaluation and the initiative into a 6-step process (Ibid.):

1. Set baselines and confirm justification
2. Plan investment, needs and objectives and measurement approaches
Clear needs and measurable objectives should be established when project or activity is planned.

3. Plan measurement

A measurement plan should be completed and shared before the project or activity begins.

4. Track results and report to improve

5. Analyze data, attributing to impact outcomes

Data collected and reported to drive improvement.

6. Report on impact

Final reporting to all stakeholders

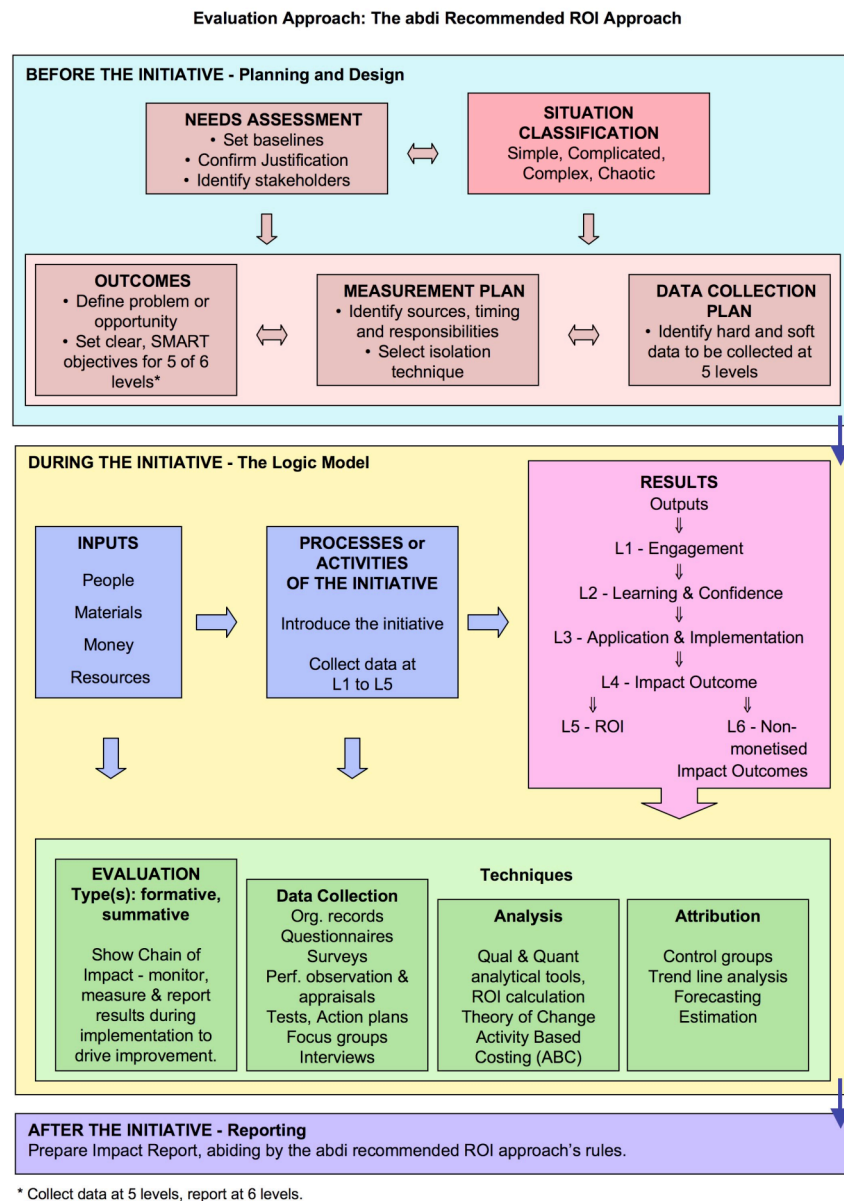


Figure 3: The abdi Recommended ROI Approach

As can be seen in the ECF (Figure 3), steps 1 to 3 occur before the initiative, steps 4 and 5 occur during, and step 6 occurs after the initiative. The process systematically tracks what happens during a project and identifies the factor(s) that changed

behaviour, then it reports based on the chain of impact. It also emphasises ongoing reporting during implementation to drive improvement. This approach captures the entire change journey, allowing the practitioner to closely examine what really contributed to different levels of outcomes.

Conclusion

This paper presented The Evaluator's Comparison Framework (ECF), a useful tool for comparing the planning, implementation (including monitoring and evaluation), and reporting elements of an initiative. It also demonstrated the framework in use with a comparison of an established evaluation approach, the Logical Framework Approach (LFA), and the relatively new, abdi Recommended ROI approach. From this demonstration, the differences between these approaches could be seen.

Evaluators, both in practice and academia, have numerous approaches available for evaluating initiatives. Therefore, having a tool, such as the ECF, can help to identify the key elements of each approach being compared at their key stages (planning, monitoring, evaluating and reporting). The ECF can help them compare approaches and select the most appropriate. For example, if their stakeholders (commissioners, funders, etc) are more interested in the outputs and immediate outcomes of their initiative, the LFA may be selected. However, if they are interested in the changes on the journey from inputs to outcomes, then abdi's approach may be more suitable.

As the ECF is further refined, other approaches are being applied to demonstrate its usefulness, including the Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) and the Social Return on Investment (SROI) approaches.

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